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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 002204

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TAGS: [ES](#) [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)  
SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: SACA'S RATINGS SLIP AS SECURITY  
CONCERNS GROW

REF: A. SAN SALVADOR 353  
[1](#)B. SAN SALVADOR 1702

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In a poll publicized September 7 and 8 in leading daily La Prensa Grafica, President Saca's ratings, while still relatively high, are continuously declining in the face of citizens' growing concerns about violent crime and sluggish economic growth. Saca's personal charisma is increasingly unable to offset public fears that gang-related homicides and other violent crime are snowballing out of control. Now nearly halfway through his five-year term, Saca must soon achieve tangible progress in fighting crime, or risk major losses for ARENA in the 2009 elections. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The poll entailed nationwide interviews August 26-31 with 1,500 individuals, and had a margin of error of 2.6 percent. Although Saca's overall approval rating of 55 percent might be the envy of many chief executives, it nonetheless denotes a continuing deterioration in the President's popularity since May of 2005, when his approval was in the low 70s. Saca garnered an average of 6.0 when those polled were asked to grade the President on a scale of one to ten. For the first time, more Salvadorans now express that crime is of greater personal concern to them than the economy and lack of jobs. Some 16 percent of those polled indicated that they or a family member had been victimized by crime in the preceding three-month period; more than half of all crimes went unreported. Although the administration received generally good marks in areas such as healthcare, education, and infrastructural development including roads, the nation's spiraling crime rate and lackluster economy are clearly beginning to affect Saca's and ARENA's fortunes. (Note: El Salvador's 2005 homicide rate of 55 murders per 100,000 population per year was the Western Hemisphere's highest, and preliminary data indicate that 2006 may turn out even worse--perhaps even surpassing all other nations worldwide. End note.)

[1](#)3. (C) COMMENT: The human tragedy represented by the nation's homicide rate is incalculable, but a UN Development Program (UNDP) study showed that violent crime cost the nation \$1.6 billion in 2003 (11.5 percent of GDP), and the problem has worsened significantly since then. Security measures are now estimated to represent approximately 20 percent of the cost of doing business in El Salvador, hobbling the country's ability to attract the foreign investment so eagerly anticipated in the wake of passage and implementation of CAFTA (see reftel A). The Ambassador and emboffs have continued to underscore to President Saca and other high-ranking officials the paramount importance of combating crime (see reftel B), and although there appears to

exist a strengthened commitment within the government to take action, the administration at times seems adrift in its inability to implement measures that will achieve concrete results. With the nation already looking ahead to 2009, when presidential, legislative, and municipal elections will occur simultaneously for the first time since 1994, Saca's lack of success in reducing violent crime is increasingly at his--and ARENA's--peril.

Barclay